

Luis Barragan's Architecture: return to the origins

Mónica DEL ARENAL

ALBERTINA Proyectos Culturales

Av. Chapultepec 221-4B

Col. Americana

44160 Guadalajara México

Phone number + 52 33 3344 6268

Cell phone + 52 33 14 205 205

mdelarenal@albertina.com.mx

Collaborators: Horacio ALCALÁ and Nicolás GODARD.

Abstract. Luis Barragán, an icon of contemporary architecture, received the Pritzker Prize in 1980. His work is considered '*as a sublime act of poetic imagination*'.

Barragán used to reflect about the vanishing of the words Beauty, Inspiration, Magic, Spellbound, Enchantment, as well as the concepts of Serenity, Silence, Intimacy and Amazement in architecture publications, and said that: '*All these words have nestled in my soul, and though I am fully aware that I have not done them complete justice in my work, they have never ceased to be my guiding lights.*'

Nowadays several works of the architect are in franc abandonment, decay or limited accessibility.

His work has plenty of references on traditional Mexican architecture, made with local and humble materials and comprises a depurated fusion of the conception of space from The Maghreb and Andalusia region. His intellectual influences and inspiring travels are the clue towards the comprehension and adequate transmission of the relevance of his work.

What are we doing in order to spread his legacy?

Luis Barragán reached professional maturity with his own style, product of the deepest constructive tradition in the rural sphere, fused with findings of his voyages through Europe and the Maghreb. He is recognized internationally through publications of his work and exhibitions in places at the height of New York's Museum Of Modern Art, such as the one that took place there in 1976 with Emilio Ambasz as curator. In 1980 he received the Pritzker prize, maximum recognition in international architecture. His house in México City is enlisted as a World Heritage site; also the Cristo, González Luna and ITESO Clavigero houses in Guadalajara where declared as National Artistic Monuments in 2006.

2

His beginnings in Guadalajara

Graduate from 'La Escuela Libre de Ingenieros de Guadalajara' (Guadalajara's Free School of Engineering), he was member of a generation of restless professionals with great intellectual pursuits in the post-revolutionary México of 1920. Of a wealthy family, belonging to the agricultural landlord system typical to vice royal México, He had permanent contact with the countryside and its traditional timeless architecture of the country's western peoples.

Ignacio Díaz Morales, Rafael Urzúa Arias, Enrique González Madrid and Pedro Castellanos Lambley would be some of the contemporaries with whom he would share his doubts and findings. Another important group of friends and teachers would feed his critic spirit and aesthetic taste: Agustín Basave, Juan Palomar y Arias, the muralist José Clemente Orozco, the painter Jesús "Chucho" Reyes and the lawyer José Arriola Adame, great music and literature connoisseur.



Figure 1. Ruins of the *Hacienda Corrales*. 2008

The trips to Europe and Northern Africa

Towards 1925, recently graduated from the faculty of engineering, he made a voyage that would mark the beginning of a fruitful career as an architect in México.

In Paris, during the Exhibition of Decorative Arts, the work of Ferdinand Bac came to his attention, a landscaper, writer and illustrator whose drawings referred to Hispanic-arabian and Mudejar architecture, with a marked taste for courtyards and gardens; also finding certain similarities between the architecture, materials, and shapes in Northern Africa that reminded him of Jalisco's haciendas. We can affirm that this connection comes from the Muslim burst into the Hispanic world and its consequences through the conquest of America in today's Mexican courtyard houses.

From both findings a process of formal use of the elements would begin, and afterwards the abstraction and depuration of a unique language: the treatment of light, the discreet manifestation of the façade in which the solid predominates over the opening, the permanent use of roofs as a *fifth façade*, the stairs as the prime linking element, the gardens and fountains as an inherent part of architecture.

Thanks to the publication of the books '*Les Colombières*' and '*Jardins enchantés*' (Bac, 1925), He was able to free creativity in his first gardens upon his return to México.

Until then, the aesthetic alternatives of the emergent México where the teachings of an academic and eclectic architecture that came from France and its confrontation with the new European wave like the *Bauhaus*, the *Esprit Nouveau* and the American *Garden city*.

In this period Luis Barragán had the function of guidance or paradigm for architecture in a moment of crisis –the end of eclecticism and the beginning of rationalism- (González Gortázar, 1991) sharing his discoveries with companions of his generation and, in not a deliberated way, creating the basis for the 'Escuela Tapatía de Arquitectura' (Guadalajara's School of Architecture) also known as *Regionalismo Tapatío*. From this movement, developed between 1926 and 1936, representative examples exist in Guadalajara City which persist in spite of some consequences of

economic development, the real state interests and the changing architectural trends.

Some of the most recognized values of this period are the synthesis of Hispano-arabic, and native cultural heritages. This fusion allowed him to create an authentic architecture, with its own identity. Luis Barragán never needed to appeal to historicist references of pre-hispanic architecture in order to testify our origin. Although at the beginning he took elements of the Andalusian house in a literal way, and, in some cases brought to life some fantasies of "*Les Jardins Enchantés*" by Ferdinand Bac (Bac,1925), this meant the beginning of search and experimentation with space.

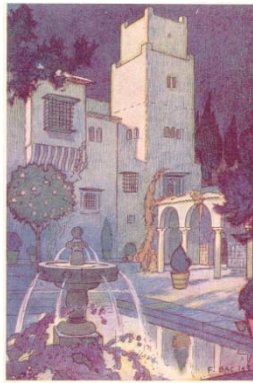
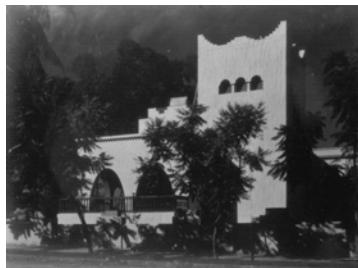


Figure 2. Image of La Tour du Calife. Ferdinand Bac, 1925.



4

Figure 3. Cristo House in Guadalajara. Luis Barragán, 1929.



Figure 4. Image of *Le bain de la Sultane*. Ferdinand Bac, 1925.



Figure 5. Robles León House, Luis Barragán, 1927.

Modern architecture

Barragán leaves Guadalajara in 1936 and upon his arrival in Mexico City begins work with a functionalist style architecture. It is toward 1940 that he develops his first great housing development: *‘El Pedregal de San Angel’*. The refinement of wide open spaces, particularly gardens, gave him the opportunity to exercise imagination and management of different scales in public and private space, always preserving the magic touch. *“A perfect garden”*, he said, *“no matter its size, should enclose nothing less than the entire universe.”*

Besides landscaping, Barragán searched for the technical domain of materials, elements and concepts in architecture in order

to create **emotional architecture**. This new concept was coined by Mathias Goeritz, one of his best colleagues, around 1950 as an antidote against the rationalist excesses of modern architecture. However for Luis Barragán both concepts were interesting: it was not only a functional perception like the precepts that Le
5 Corbusier's *'La Maison Outil'* marked in the first third of the 20th century. Although interested in this new conception of 'house', he never forgot the importance of the house as a refuge, as a space for introspection and solitude.

His Legacy

Towards 1947 he built his house and studio, within a working class neighborhood located southeast in México City. The austere façade makes it completely unnoticed and can mean an initial deception to whoever goes in search of a masterpiece. In its interior, the colorful entrance hall gives a soothing welcome and from there on the journey through the house becomes unpredictable, always surprising; his room of a purely monastery character, the roof from which only the sky can be seen, the delicate workmanship of furniture designed by himself, the intimate dining room with hand crafted plates of pottery that say *Solitude*. And from the room, the sensation of a deep and dense garden that was actually composed in a rather small area of land wrapping us in an ambient of serenity and isolation. In a note made on a paper from New York's St. Moritz Hotel he wrote:

'We must search for houses to be gardens and for gardens to be houses... We shouldn't trust open gardens that show themselves at a first glance. The contemplation of the dead and tasteless "open gardens" that cover the city of Washington – which don't invite to be visited- , make me turn my eyes towards the gardens of Generalife in Granada. I think with love in beautiful gardens' (Ruy Sánchez, 1999)

Ignacio Díaz Morales used to say that the best tribute to the work of Luis Barragán is not to copy his work, but understand his approach to the architecture in a wider context. In Luis Barragán's words, we take his legacy:

"Don't ask me about this building or that one, don't look at what I do. See what I saw." (De Anda, 1989)

He died in 1988 in his home of Tacubaya, México City, considered his greatest work, which today functions as a museum and houses his personal library.

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